Leading From Within

Reflections on Spirituality and Leadership

from a Talk given in 1990
by Parker J. Palmer

In the last decade or two, we have done a lot of moaning in this country about the lack of moral, humane, and visionary leadership in the public arena. But today, if we have eyes to see, we can took around the world and find those moral, visionary, humane leaders. We can find them in South Africa, we can find them in Latin America, and we can find them in Eastern Europe.

Tonight I want to begin with the words of one of those people, whose credentials for leadership are far more authentic than mine. I want to quote some remarks that Vaclav Havel (playwright, dissident, prisoner, and now president of Czechostovakia) made to the U.S. Congress just a few weeks ago. It was surely one of the most remarkable speeches ever delivered on the floor of our national legislative body:

"As long as people are people, democracy, in the full sense of the word, will always be no more than an ideal. In this sense, you too are merely approaching democracy uninterruptedly for more than 200 years, and your journey toward the horizon has never been disrupted by a totalitarian system.

“The communist type of totalitarian system has left both our nations, Czechs and Slovak, as it has all the nations of the Soviet Union and the other countries the Soviet Union subjugated in its time, a legacy of countless dead, an infinite spectrum of human suffering, profound economic decline and, above all, enormous human humiliation. It has brought us horrors that fortunately you have not known. [I think we Americans should confess that some in our country have known such horrors. -P.J.P.]

“It has also given us something positive, a special capacity to took from time to time somewhat further than someone who has not undergone this bitter experience. A person who cannot move and lead a somewhat normal life because he is pinned under a boulder has more time to think about his hopes than someone who is not trapped that way.

“What I’m trying to say is this: we must all learn many things from you, from how to educate our offspring, how to elect our representatives, all the way to how to organize our economic life so that it will lead to prosperity and not to poverty. But it doesn’t have to be merely assistance from the well educated, powerful and wealthy to someone who has nothing and therefore has nothing to offer in return.

“We too can offer something to you: our experience and the knowledge that has come from it. The specific experience I’m talking about has given me one certainty: *consciousness precedes being*, and not the other way around, as the Marxists claim. For this reason, the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility. Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our being as humans, and the catastrophe toward

which this world is headed—be it ecological, social, demographic or a general breakdown of civilization—will be unavoidable."

Inner Realities

I don't know if there has ever been, from a more remarkable source, a stronger affirmation of the work of religion and higher education than Havel's words, *"Consciousness precedes being,"* and *"The salvation of the world lies in the human heart."* Here is the heart of the matter——the formation of the human heart, the reformation of the human heart, and the rescuing of the human heart from all its deformations.

Matter, he is trying to tell us, is not the fundamental factor in the movement of history. Spirit is. Consciousness is. Human awareness is. Thought is. Spirituality is. Those are the deep sources of freedom and power with which people have been able to move boulders and create change. Havel's images resonate deeply with all the great religious traditions.

But let me say something that Vaclav Havel was too polite to say: It isn't only the Marxists who have believed that *matter* is more powerful than *consciousness*. It isn't only the Marxists who have believe that economics is more fundamental than spirit. It isn't only the Marxists who have believed that the flow of cash creates more reality than does the flow of ideas. The capitalists have believed these things too, and Havel was simply too nice to say it. But we can say it to ourselves. We can remind ourselves that we have a long and crippling legacy in our own system of thought of believing in the external world much more deeply than we believe in the internal world.

How many times have you heard, "Those are good ideas, inspiring notions, but the reality is….?" How many times have you

heard people try to limit our creativity by treating institutional and economic realities as absolute constraints on what we are able to do? How many times have you waited for a foundation grant before taking a step? How many times have you worked in a system based on the belief that the only changes that really matter are are the ones that you can count or measure or tally up externally? This is not just a Marxist problem. This is a human problem, at least in our twentieth century, technological society.

The great insight of our spiritual traditions is that external reality does not impinge upon us as a prison or as an ultimate constraint. The great insight of our spiritual traditions is that we *co-create* the world, that we live in and through a complex interaction of spirit and matter, a complex interaction of what is inside of us and what is "out there." The insight of our spiritual traditions is not to deny the reality of the outer world, but to help us understand that we create that world, in part, by projecting our spirit on it—for better or worse.

Vaclav Havel has said some hard things to his own people about how they conspired in the domination of a tyrannical communist system through their passivity. We too are responsible for the existence of tyrannical conditions, of external constraints which crush our spirit, because we are responsible for co-creating the world through the projection of our internal limitations. The spiritual traditions tell us that we have complicity in the making of the world as it is. We are not victims of that world, we are its co-creators. The fact that we have complicity in world-making is a source of awesome responsibility (sometimes painful responsibility), and a source of profound hope for change.

Spirituality is not primarily about values and ethics, not about exhortations to do right or live well. The spiritual traditions are primarily about *reality*. The spiritual traditions are an effort to penetrate the illusions of the external world and to name its

underlying truth—what it is, how it emerges, and how we relate to it.

The insight that I want to draw from the spiritual traditions, and from Havel, is an insight that may be best expressed in a word from depth psychology. The word is "projection." We share responsibility for creating the external world by projecting either a spirit of light or a spirit of shadow on that which is "other" than us. Either a spirit of hope or a spirit of despair. Either an inner confidence in wholeness and integration, or an inner terror about life being diseased and ultimately terminal. We have a choice about what we are going to project, and in that choice we help create the world that is. *Consciousness precedes being*.

Leaders Have a Shadow Side

What does all of this have to do with leadership, and with the relation of leadership to spirituality? I'll give you a quick definition of a leader: a leader is a person who has an unusual degree of power to project on other people his or her shadow, or his or her light. A leader is a person who has an unusual degree of power to create the conditions under which other people must live and move and have their being—conditions that can either be as illuminating as heaven or as shadowy as hell. A leader is a person who must take special responsibility for what's going on inside him or her self, inside his or her consciousness, lest the act of leadership create more harm than good.

I want to took at the shadow side of leadership. In the literature on leadership there are so many pamphlets and books which seem to be about "the power of positive thinking." I am afraid that they may feed a common delusion among leaders that

their efforts are always well-intended, their power always benign. I suggest that the challenge is to examine our consciousness for those ways in which we project more shadow than light.

I'm not talking simply about the heads of nation states. I'm talking, for example, about a classroom teacher who has the power to create conditions under which young people must spend half of their waking hours, day in and day out, five days a week. Have you ever walked into a classroom in which the leader is projecting light? Have you ever walked into a classroom in which the leader is projecting a huge and ominous shadow? That's the question, that's the choice.

I'm thinking about a clergy person who has a choice between creating conditions in a congregation which are of the light, or conditions which are of the shadow. I'm thinking about the CEO of a corporation, large or small, who faces the same choice day in and day out—but often does not even know that the choice is being made.

The problem is that people rise to leadership in our society by a tendency towards extroversion, which means a tendency to ignore what is going on inside themselves. Leaders rise to power in our society by operating very competently and effectively in the external world, sometimes at the cost of internal awareness. I'm suggesting that leaders, in the very way they become leaders, may tend to be people who screen out the inner consciousness that Vaclav Havel is calling us to attend to. I have met many leaders whose confidence in the external world is so high that they regard the inner life as illusory, as a waste of time, as a magical fantasy trip into a region that doesn't even exist. But the link between leadership and spirituality calls us to re-examine that denial of the inner life.

I think leaders often feed themselves on "the power of positive thinking" because their jobs are hard. They face many external discouragements. They don't get a lot of reward, and so they feel a need to "psych themselves up" even if it means ignoring the inner shadow. Of course leaders are supported in this by an American culture that wants to externalize everything, that wants to see the good life as a matter of external arrangements rather than inner well being.

I've looked at some training program for leaders. I'm discouraged by how often they focus on the development of skills to manipulate the external world rather than *the skills necessary to go inward and make the inner journey*. I find that discouraging because it feeds a dangerous syndrome in leadership.

Now, let me turn to a comment on the nature of spirituality. Spirituality, like leadership, is a very hard word to pin down. These are probably two of the vaguest words you can find in our language, and when you put them together you get something even vaguer.

Let me share a remarkable quote from Annie Dillard, from a book with the wonderful title, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. This is obviously someone who believes in the inner life—and I have never read a more evocative description of the nature of the inner spiritual journey:

> *"In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world's rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for*

evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned."

Going In and Down

Annie Dillard is saying several things that are very important for a spirituality of leadership. She is saying, first of all, that the spiritual journey moves downward and inward, not upward toward abstraction. It moves downward toward the hardest concrete realities of of our lives. Part of the gift of feminist spirituality is a reversal of what we traditionally understood spirituality to be, which was up and out——up, up, and away!

Annie Dillard is saying that we must go in and down. And she's saying that on the way down and in, we will meet the violence and terror we have within ourselves that we project outward onto our institutions, onto our society. She's talking, for example, about our tendency to make enemies by projecting what we hate within ourselves on somebody else because we don't want to go down and in and meet the enemy in our own souls. So we imagine that someone out there is the enemy—people of another race, people of another economic system—and we deal with the "enemy" by killing them, when what we are really reacting to is the shadow in ourselves.

Annie Dillard is saying we have to go down and in, and on the way we meet monsters. But if we ride those monsters all the way down, we find the most precious thing of all: the unified field, our complex and inexplicable caring for one another, the community we have underneath our brokenness, our life together which, she says, is given, not learned. Great leadership comes from people who have made that downward journey through

violence and terror, who have touched the deep place where we are in community with each other, and who can help take other people to that place. *That is what great leadership is all about.*

That's what Vaclav Havel is talking about, because the downward journey is what you take when you are "under a stone" for 40 years. That's what you do when you are a victim of oppression. Isn't it remarkable how Nelson Mandela took 30 years in prison to prepare himself for leadership rather than for despair? He went down, and he went in, and he dealt with the violence and terror, and he emerged a leader of amazing strength able to lead people toward "our complex and inexplicable caring for each other." It seems to me that this is a splendid image for the spiritual journey, the journey that leaders must take if Havel and Dillard are right.

Now the question is, why would anybody want to take such a difficult and dangerous journey? Everything in us cries out against it. That's why we externalize everything—it's easier to deal with the external world. It's easier to spend your life manipulating an institution than it is dealing with your own soul. It truly is. We make institutions sound complicated and hard and rigorous, but they are a piece of cake compared with our inner workings!

Get Into It

Let me tell you a little parable about why one might want to take the inner journey, a little parable from my own life. It was about ten years ago. I was in my early forties. I decided to go on that amazing program called Outward Bound. I was in the midst of a mid-life crisis at the lime—one of those times when the violence and terror within us start to come up.

I thought Outward Bound might be a useful challenge at that time in my life, and I elected to spend ten days at a place called Hurricane Island. I should have known from the name what was in store for me. The next time I will choose the program at Pleasant Valley, or at Happy Gardens! It was a week of sheer terror. It was also a week of amazing growth and great teaching and a deep sense of community, the likes of which I've seldom experienced.

In the middle of that Outward Bound course I faced the challenge that I had most feared. They backed me up to the edge of a cliff that was 110 feel off the ground. They tied a very thin rope to my waist, a frayed and stretchy rope, and then they told me to back down that cliff.

So I said, "Well, what do I do?"

The instructor, in typical Outward Bound fashion, said, "GO!"

So I went, and I went BOOM!, down to that first ledge. I just slammed into that ledge with considerable force.

The instructor looked down at me and said, "l don't think you quite have it yet."

I said, "Right. Now what do I do?"

He said, "The only way to do this is to lean back as far as you can, because you have to get your feet at right angles to the rock face so you'll have pressure on them."

Of course I *knew* that he was wrong. I knew that the trick was to hug the mountain, to stay as close to the rock face as you can. So I tried it again, and ... BOOM!, I hit the ledge. Not quite as hard, but I slipped and hit it again.

He said, "You still don't have it." And I said, "Well, what do I do?"

And he said, "Lean way back and take the next step."

The next step was a very big one, but I took it. Wonder of wonders, I began to get it. I leaned back, and sure enough, I was moving down that rock face, eyes on the heavens, making tiny, tiny, tiny movements with my feet, but gaining confidence with every step.

When I got about half way down, a second instructor called up from below. She said, “Parker, I think you better stop and took at what’s happening beneath your feet.”

So I lowered my eyes (very slowly, so that I wouldn’t change my center of gravity), and there beneath my feet a large hole was opening up in the rock, which meant that I was going to have to change directions.

I froze. I have never been so paralyzed in my life, so full of physical fear. I knew I could do it if I could just keep going straight, but I could *not* change directions. I just froze in sheer terror.

The teacher let me hang there for what seemed like a very tong time, and finally she shouted up, “Parker, is anything wrong?”

To this day, I do not know where these words came from (though I have twelve witnesses that I spoke them). But in a high, squeaky voice I said, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

The teacher said, “Then I think it’s time you learned the motto of the Outward Bound School.”

I thought, “Oh, keen! I”m about to die, and she's giving me a motto!”

But then she yelled up to me words that I will never forget, words that have been genuinely empowering for me ever since. She said, “The motto of the Outward Bound Hurricane Island School is, ‘IF YOU CAN’T GET OUT OF IT, GET INTO IT’”

I have believed in the idea of “the word became flesh” for a long time, but I had never had a real experience of it. But those words seemed so profoundly true to me at that existential moment that they entered my body, bypassed my mind, and moved my legs and feet. It was just so clear that there was no way out of that situation except to get into it. No helicopter was going to come; they weren't going to haul me up on the rope; I wasn’t going to float down. I had to get into it, and my feet started to move.

That image is very powerful to me. It is an image of the movement of the spiritual life and why it is that anyone would ever want to take the inner journey that Annie Dillard writes about. The answer is: There is no way out of our inner lives, so we'd better get into them. In the downward, inward journey, the only way out is in and through.

Out of the Shadow, Into the Light

I want to talk specifically about the shadow life of leaders. I’d like to talk about the way those shadows get projected on institutions and on our society. I’d like to talk about some monsters that leaders need to ride all the way down if we are to create less shadow and more light. I have five of them as a sampler, and a few thoughts on how the inner journey might transform our leadership at these five points.

One of the biggest shadows inside a lot of leaders is deep insecurity about their own identity, their own worth. That insecurity is hard to see in extroverted people. But the extroversion is often there precisely because we are insecure about who we are and are trying to prove ourselves in the external world rather than wrestling with our inner identity.

This insecurity takes a specific form that I have seen many times, (especially in men), and I see in myself: we have an identity that is so hooked up with external, institutional functions that we may literally die when those functions are taken away from us. We live in terror at the thought of what will happen to us if our institutional identity were ever to disappear.

Do you know the tragedy I see in our institutions when leaders operate with a deep, unexamined insecurity about their own identity? These leaders create institutional settings which deprive other people of their identity as a way of dealing with the unexamined fears in the leaders themselves.

Can I give a simple little example, which may even be painful? I am astonished at the number of times I call an office and the person who answers the phone says, "Dr. Jones' office; this is Nancy," because the boss has said to do it that way. The leader has a title and no first name; the person who answers the phone doesn't even have a last name. This is a powerful example of depriving someone else of an identity in order to enhance your own.

Everywhere I took I see institutions that are depriving large numbers of people of their identity so that a few people can enhance theirs. I look at schools and I see hundreds of thousands of students who have been deprived of an identity by the educational system so that teachers and administrators can have more identity for themselves, as if this were a zero-sum game, a win-lose situation.

I go around the country talking to people in higher education, and wherever I go I ask students, "When was the last time that you were asked to relate your life story to the things you are studying?" They say, "What? Our life story doesn't count here." The whole deal in higher education is to replace your "little" life story with the "big" story. The whole

deal in an expert-dominated, technocratic form of education is to devalue those little parochial stories on behalf of the "true" one. Reflected in that strategy I see a kind of leadership which is so insecure about its own identity that it has to deprive other people of theirs.

I've talked with some nurses and doctors who say, "Think of what we do to patients in a hospital. Talk about depriving people of identity so that leaders can have more for themselves,!" This kind of organizational culture comes out of a profound insecurity on the part of people in power.

But if you're ever with people (or in an organization led by a person) who know "all the way down" who they are, whose identity doesn't depend on a role which might be taken, away at any moment, you are with people and in settings which *give* you identity, which *empower* you to be someone. I think that's a core issue in the spirituality of leadership, because the great spiritual gift that comes as one takes the inward journey is to know for certain that "who I am" does not depend on "what I do." Identity doesn't depend on titles. It doesn't depend on degrees. It doesn't depend on functioning. It depends only on the simple fact that I am a child of God, valued and treasured for what I am. When a leader knows that, the classroom is different, the hospital is different, and the office is different.

Is the Universe Safe?

That's the first shadow of leadership I want to name. The second shadow that is inside a lot of us (and please understand that I am talking about myself and my struggles here as much as anybody else's), is the perception that the universe is essentially hostile to human interests and that life is fundamentally a battleground.

As I listen to everyday discourse, it is amazing to me how many battle images I hear as people go about the work of leadership. We talk about tactics and strategy, about using our "big guns," about "do or die," about wins and losses. The imagery here suggests that if we fail to be fiercely competitive, we're going to lose, because the basic structure of the universe is a vast combat. The tragedy of that inner shadow, that unexamined inner fear, is that it helps create situations where people actually have to live that way. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The self-fulfilling prophecy is a central concept in the problem that I'm talking about. A quick example: a bank in this town may be a perfectly sound bank. But if enough people start a false rumor that it's an insolvent bank, everybody will line up to withdraw their money and the bank *will* be insolvent because the prophecy has fulfilled itself.

Our commitment to competition is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yes, the world is competitive, but only because we make it that way. Some of the best places in our world, some of the best corporations, some of the best schools, are learning that there is *another* way of going about things, a way that's consensual, that's cooperative, that's communal. They are fulfilling a different prophecy and creating a different reality.

The spiritual gift we receive as we take the inward journey is the knowledge that the universe is working together for good. The universe really isn't out to get anybody; the structure of reality is not the structure of a battle or a combat. Yes, there's death, but it's part of the cycle of life, and when people learn to move with that cycle, there is a coherence and great harmony in our lives. That's the spiritual insight that can transform this particular dimension of leadership—and transform our institutions.

The third shadow in leaders I call "functional atheism." This is the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with *me.* It is a belief held even among people whose theology affirms a higher power than the human self, people who do not understand themselves as atheists but whose behavior belies their belief!

Functional atheism is an unconscious belief that leads to workaholic behavior, to burn-out, to stressed and strained and broken relationships, to unhealthy priorities. Functional atheism is the unexamined conviction within us that if anything decent is going to happen here, *I* am the one who needs to make it happen. Functional atheism is the reason why the average group (according to studies) can tolerate only 15 seconds of silence; people believe that if they are not making noise, nothing is happening! Functional atheism is an inner shadow of leaders that leads to dysfunctional behavior on every level of our lives.

The great gift we receive on the inner journey is the certain knowledge that ours is not the only act in town. Not only are there other acts in town, but some of them, from time to time, are even better than ours! On this inner journey we learn that we do not have to carry the whole load, that we can be empowered by sharing the load with others, and that sometimes we are even free to lay our part of the load down. On the inner journey we learn that co-creation leaves us free to do only what we are called and able to do, and to trust the rest to other hands.; With that learning, we become leaders who cast less shadow and more light.

The Shadow of Fear

The fourth shadow among leaders is fear. There are many kinds of fear, but I am thinking especially of our fear of the

natural chaos of life. I think a lot of leaders become leaders because they have a life-long devotion to eliminating all remnants of chaos from the world. They're trying to order and organize things so thoroughly that the nasty stuff will never bubble up around us—such nasty stuff as dissent, innovation, challenge, and change.

In an organization, this particular shadow gets projected outward as rigidity of rules, procedures, and personnel manuals. It creates corporate cultures that are imprisoning rather than empowering. What we forget from our spiritual tradition is that God *created* out of chaos. Chaos is the pre-condition to creativity, and any organization (or any individual) that doesn't have an arena of creative chaos is already half dead. When a leader is so fearful of chaos as not to be able to protect and nurture that arena for other people, there is deep trouble.

The spiritual gift on the inner journey is to know that creation comes out of chaos, and that even what has been created needs to be returned to chaos every now and then to get recreated in a more vital form. The spiritual gift on this inner journey is the knowledge that in chaos I can not only survive, but I can thrive, that there is vitality in that chaotic field of energy.

Denial of Death

My final example of the shadows that leaders can project on others involves the denial of death. We live in a culture that just does not want to talk about things dying. You see this all the time in our institutional life. You see leaders all over the place demanding that they themselves, and the people who work for them, artificially maintain things that aren't

alive any longer and maybe never have been. Projects and programs that should have been laid down ten years ago are still on the life-support system even though they've been in a coma for decades.

There's fear in this denial of death, the fear of negative evaluation, the fear of public failure. Surprisingly, the people in our culture who are least afraid of death, in this sense, are the scientists. The scientific community really honors the failure of a hypothesis because they *learn* something from the death of an idea. But in a lot of organizations, if you fail at what you are doing, you'll find a pink slip in your box. Again, the best organizations and leaders, I think, are asking people to take action that may sometimes lead to failure, to understand that from failure we learn.

The spiritual gift on the inner journey is the knowledge that death is natural and that death is not the final word. The spiritual gift is to know that allowing something to die is also allowing new life to emerge. That's the core spiritual insight that can move us beyond our denial of death.

My final words have to do with how we can help each other deal with the spiritual issues inherent in leadership. We *must* help each other because these are critical issues. The failure of leaders to deal with their own inner life is creating conditions of real misery for lots and lots of folks. Too many organizations in our society are in deep trouble around the leadership shadows I have tried to name. One way out of trouble is for leaders to start recovering the power of the inner journey. How might that happen? A few quick comments.

It would be wonderful if the phrase "inner work" could become a central term in our schools and in our churches, if

we could help people understand that the phrase really means something. There are things that you can do that constitute "inner work" that are as real and as important as any outer project or task. It would be grand if you had a committee of people in the church who are doing "inner work" as well as the outer work of the congregation. Some churches do: they have people who engage in intercessory prayer. And there: are many other forms of "inner work" as well.

A second thing we can do is to remind each other that while inner work is a deeply *personal* matter, it's not necessarily a *private* matter. There are ways to be together in community to help each other with that "inner work." I have been very touched in my own experience by the Quaker tradition where they know how to come together around people who have deep "inner work" to do. They come together with them in a way that is supportive but not invasive, that asks a lot of questions but never renders judgment or gives advice. They come together with ·them in a way that respects the mystery of the human heart, but that still allows people to challenge and stretch one another in that work.

The German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, has a little book called *Letters to a Young Poet*, one of the most beautiful books I have ever read. In that book he has a definition of love which astounds me. I want to quote it because it's the kind of thing I'm trying to communicate about being together in our "inner work." Rilke says, "Love is this—that two solitudes border, protect, and salute one another." He avoids the invasive and violent notion of "getting in there and fixing each other up" that we have in our culture. But he affirms the possibility of being present to a person's solitude, a person's mystery, while that deep "inner work" goes on.

I wish I had time to tell you, as a person who's struggled through two bouts of that deep inner work called "depression," about the healing that came as a few people found ways to stand at the border of my solitude in that experience. They provided life-lines to the human community for me, without being driven by their own fears to either "fix" or abandon me. It *is* possible for people to be together that way if we have education for leadership that is not simply about the skills to manipulate the external world, but is also about the personal and corporate disciplines of the inner world.

Finally, we need to remember that all the great spiritual traditions, when you boil them down, are saying one simple thing: ***Be Not Afraid!*** They don't say you can't have fear, because we all have fears, and leaders have fears aplenty. But they say you don't have to *be* your fears, and you don't have to create a world in which those fears dominate the conditions of many, many people.

I know that many of you are on this journey toward leading from within. I'm grateful for your companionship, and I wish you blessings and power as you continue this work of inner discovery and leadership in your own lives.

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For more information on Parker J. Palmer and his writings, these are good resources:

- Follow Parker on Substack at **parkerjpalmer.substack.com**. It's free!
- Amazon page with all 10 of his books is **here**.
- Founder's page on the Center for Courage & Renewal website is **here**.